

Speaking of

Teaching



THE CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING • STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Faculty/TA Teaching Teams

Faculty and graduate students bring to the challenge of teaching together diverse ranges of experience and differing levels of development as teachers and mentors. Regular and open communication between faculty and TAs is the most effective way, of course, of ensuring that diversity or differences in experience and development contribute to a successful collaboration. But there are also several different roles that faculty may want to be aware of and be willing to play in order to most effectively supervise their TAs and nurture them in the dual process of becoming teachers and responsible representatives of their disciplines.

Several different stages of TA development—*Senior Learners*, *Colleagues-in-Training*, and *Junior Colleagues*—and accompanying faculty roles have been identified by Jody Nyquist and Donald Wulff in *Working Effectively With Graduate Assistants* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).

The nuances of the development stages and faculty roles will be discussed in the following paragraphs. This newsletter further outlines how teaching teams can benefit from discussions about the kind of learning that takes place in their course. Finally, linguistics graduate students compile practical suggestions about “What TAs Like.”

Senior Learners

TAs on the first level of pedagogical development can be seen as “Senior Learners” since their competence up to that point has been demonstrated more by their excellence as students than by their experience as teachers. They are in survival mode and are concerned about

and performance are skills that require advance planning and conscientious follow through. If faculty can establish a relationship with, and set expectations for, their TAs early on—well before the beginning of the term—TAs will then be much more willing and able to rise to the occasion. With enough advance

Know what role the professor wants you to take. Is it to lecture on new material, present existing material in a new way, answer questions, lead discussions, create illustrative projects, simply be another participant in the discussion, etc.? Different faculty have different expectations.

Teaching Assistant

whether their students will like them. They tend to rely on faculty and colleagues for directions (p.20).

What faculty can do. When faced with the prospect of teaching with TAs on the first level of development, faculty may have to cultivate and draw upon management skills that are not generally part of the preparation of university professors. How best to motivate, coordinate, and monitor a TA’s progress

notice, the TAs will have the chance to coordinate the needs of the faculty with the demands of their other commitments (p.7). In this “Manager” role, faculty should try to make their expectations as clear and detailed as possible, while remaining aware of the needs of the TAs (p.8). Outline grading guidelines or rubrics, and discuss grading practices and what kind of feedback

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motivates students to learn in your course. Grade the first assignment of the course together. Observe new TAs and give them frequent feedback on their teaching.

What TAs can do. Be pro-active and ask questions to clarify what your duties are, what is expected of you, and how you should do it. Find out as much as

effective and innovative teaching practices and noting their overall approach and attitude toward teaching in their discipline.

What faculty can do. Nyquist and Wulff suggest that faculty should try to model behavior that they want their TAs to emulate and use a variety of teaching methods to reflect a “broader conceptual-

out why faculty are teaching the way they are. Offer to help create assignments, help prepare a lecture, or assume responsibility for other elements of the course. Invite your professor to observe your teaching and ask her/him to write up a report about it. Reflect on your teaching and take notes on it during the course or immediately after the course. What worked and why? How did the students react to your teaching strategies? Keep all teaching documents you design because you might need them later, if you teach in this course again, decide to write a teaching statement, put a teaching portfolio together, or design your own course.

I want my TAs to feel a bit of ownership of the course. To achieve this I try to get them actively involved in setting assignments, creating assignment grading sheets, thinking about the course design and structure, and ways to make the lectures more attractive. I help them prepare and I evaluate their performance in class. Faculty

possible about the students you will be teaching. Talk with your peers about your challenges and ask them for helpful tips. Don't reinvent the wheel—build on what has worked for others. Ask for constructive feedback on your teaching. Attend a CTL practice teaching session that will enable you to teach a small segment of a lesson in front of other TAs who will give you constructive feedback. Request a free midquarter small group evaluation from CTL that will help you assess how your teaching is going. Attend departmental or CTL teaching workshops. (For more details about CTL's resources see <http://ctl.stanford.edu>.)

Colleagues-in-Training

TAs enter the “Colleague-in-Training” stage of development when they gain experience and confidence in their authority as teachers by emulating their faculty role models. They are now open to new ideas and ready to employ creative approaches to teaching (p.11). TAs can best learn these new ideas and creative approaches by observing faculty model

ization” of the material (p.12). It is also particularly helpful if faculty can take the time to demonstrate their teaching methodology to TAs. Share with them the ways you think about teaching certain material, designing assignments, and planning lectures or demonstrations (p.13). Explain why you teach the way you teach, and how your pedagogical choices further the goals of your course. At this stage, the TAs are able to assume more responsibility. Involve them in designing an activity, an assignment, or a paper prompt. Invite them to prepare part or all of a lecture and discuss their performance with them afterward. This way, the TAs can reflect on their own teaching choices and understand those of the faculty more clearly.

What TAs can do. Now that you have mastered the basic teaching skills, expand your teaching experience and engage in a more conceptual discussion about teaching practices and goals. Look for the bigger picture as you figure out what your professional goals are. Ask to observe your professors in the classroom and find

Junior Colleagues

At the third stage of development, a TA is ready to be treated more like a peer, to learn about collegial roles and collaboration, and to contribute their own insights to the structuring of the course (13). This stage of development calls for TAs to be treated as “decision makers” who have their own style of teaching and views on pedagogical methodology (p.14).

What faculty can do. The most experienced TAs need less supervision and more peer-level dialogue, and might be ready as well for the chance to lecture and assist in designing a course and formulating course policies (p.5). Discuss with them how your research informs your teaching. Show them how your course fits in the departmental or university-wide curriculum. Introduce them to the specific discourse of teaching in your field, including professional organizations that support teaching. Initiate a pedagogy lunch with colleagues and graduate students.

What TAs can do. Offer to assist your professor in designing the course, writing assignments and exams, and preparing course materials early in the process. Volunteer to lecture and ask for feedback on your lecture. Practice your lecture with an Oral Communication consultant at the Speaking Center. Have

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yourself videorecorded and request a consultation with a CTL consultant about your performance. Find out how the course you will be teaching fits in the departmental curriculum. If you intend to pursue an academic career, ask colleagues who recently landed an academic position how to best prepare yourself for the teaching responsibilities of a future faculty position. Attend advanced CTL workshops on professional topics, such as course design, lecturing, jump starting an academic career, or preparing a teaching portfolio.

By taking these several developmental stages and the accompanying faculty roles into account, TAs and faculty alike can take more conscious and supportive roles in making the Faculty/TA teaching partnership as effective and mutually beneficial as possible. ♦

Using Faculty/TA partnerships to Advance Student Learning

By I-Chant A. Chiang (Graduate Student, Psychology) and Michelle Gumbrecht (Graduate Student, Psychology)

Most of this newsletter concentrates on the development of TAs as teachers and how teaching teams can build good working relationships. Another aspect that can guide teaching teams is an explicit and open dialogue about how students learn in their course. TAs will feel like integral members of the teaching team if they know what the learning objectives are, why they are important, and how students can reach them.

However, faculty and TAs also play different roles in fostering their students' learning. Making these differences clear

and using them in a purposeful way will create a strong learning environment for the students. One way to convey to students the nature of this teaching partnership is to explain the roles that faculty and TAs play in the course. For example, the professor's role is to teach the bigger-picture concepts; TAs are to teach details of those concepts. This explanation reframes the relationship so that TAs are not merely there to provide "damage control," clarifying the main points of the professor's lecture that seemed oblique to the students.

As with any team-teaching, presenting a united front for policies and logistics will express solidarity in the teaching goals and procedures. One professor stressed that this is "vital" to the course. But some disagreement on scholarly issues is healthy: "...[I]t can be stimulating for students when Professor and TA have slightly divergent points of view." In this way, students learn that there are often differences of opinion in the field and how to debate respectfully with other academics.

Because TAs usually work with a smaller number of students and have a closer relationship with them, they are often in the position of being more accessible, approachable, and able to effect change. Therefore, TAs can assess the students' progress during the course and provide ongoing feedback to faculty on students' preferences and levels of performance, instead of waiting until end-quarter evaluations. Students will appreciate that their input makes a difference, especially while in the midst of the course.

Lastly, both faculty and TAs can exchange teaching tips on what works best for the students, or how they can help students overcome challenges. Faculty have the advantage of having overseen many TAs and iterations of the course. But TAs have the advantage of bringing fresh perspectives and experimenting with new techniques on a small scale. This combination of insights can be fruitful in enhancing the students' learning experience. ♦

Further Readings

(The books are available at CTL's library.)

Curzan, Anne and Lisa Damour. *First Day to Final Grade. A Graduate Student's Guide to Teaching*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Marincovich, Michele, Jack Prostko, and Frederic Stout, eds. *The Professional Development of Graduate Teaching Assistants*. Bolton: Anker, 1998.

Nyquist, Jody D. and Donald H. Wulff. *Working Effectively with Graduate Assistants*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996.

Reis, Richard M. *Tomorrow's Professor: Preparing for Academic Careers in Science and Engineering*. New York: IEEE Press, 1997.

Ross, Catherine and Jane Dumphy. *Strategies for Teaching Assistant and International Teaching Assistant Development*. Bolton: Anker, 2007.

What's Working in TA Training 2006. (A biennial CTL publication, also available at http://ctl.stanford.edu/TA/whats_working.pdf.)

If you are interested in learning more on how CTL can support your TA training program or graduate student professional development, please contact:

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For more information on CTL TA training resources see:

<http://ctl.stanford.edu/TA/>

From the Linguistics Department: What TAs Like

The list “What TAs Like” was originally compiled in 1999 by Linguistics graduate student advisor Professor Peter Sells and two veteran linguistics TAs: Ida Toivonen and Dave McKercher. Since its composition, the list has been discussed by faculty and has been incorporated into the curriculum of the Linguistics TA Training Course. The list has been particularly useful for new TAs as they begin to think about their relationship with faculty. Faculty have also considered it to be a helpful reminder.

- TAs like it when the professors do part of the grading. The reasons why: It makes it easier to discuss whether or not the workload for the class is appropriate. It also gives guidelines as to how harsh/easy we should be when grading the students.
- TAs like having weekly meetings with the professor(s) and the other TAs. The reasons why: This helps us see what needs to get done within the near future, so that we can plan our time around it. The meetings are also a good forum to ask how the grading should be done (point break-down, etc.), what should be covered in section, etc.
- TAs like getting solution sheets for the problems. This makes grading easier,

and it might help avoid misunderstandings. Also, if there is disagreement as to what the best solution is, it is better for this to become clear earlier rather than later.

- TAs like it if they know well beforehand what they are supposed to do. If the professor wants the TAs to be available a couple of hours before class to photocopy, proof-read handouts, etc., it’s nice if this is made explicit early on in the quarter.
- TAs really like it when the professor comes and visits their section once or twice during the quarter. In fact, any kind of feedback is highly appreciated.
- TAs like to get the chance to give one (or more) of the “real” lectures, with the professor present to give feedback.
- TAs (and students) like it when the classes begin and end on time. ♦

This newsletter is a revised and expanded version of the 2001, Vol. 11, No. 3 ‘Speaking of Teaching’ issue with the same title. Faculty and TA quotes are from a faculty and TA survey that was conducted in fall 2001.

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CTL Programs and Resources for Graduate Students and TA Training Programs

CTL offers a range of free services and resources to graduate students and departments and programs:

- Quarterly orientations for new TAs
- Midquarter small group evaluations
- Individual consultations
- Videotaping service
- Practice teaching sessions
- Quarterly workshops on teaching, oral communication, and professional development
- CTL Courses
- Job practice talks
- Graduate student pedagogy reading group
- “Award-Winning Teachers on Teaching” lecture series
- Departmental workshops
- Liaison and consultant programs
- Annual faculty/TA training conference
- TA training grants
- Teaching handbook, handouts, newsletters, and video library
- Technology in teaching support

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